

HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW

URBAN GARDENS



How much food can you grow on one acre in urban West Virginia? The West Virginia Department of Agriculture set out to find the answer. The results are in.

“We don’t grow much here in West Virginia,” said Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick. “We’re trying to get the movement back to the earth. We want to set the example.”

The goal behind the demonstration gardens comes down to giving people an idea of what they can grow on a small plot of land, how much it costs to get your garden growing, and how much money a fruitful harvest can net.

It all started back in the spring. Two test plots, one in Kanawha County and the other in Wood, were chosen and prepped for planting. A plastic and drip irrigation system, installed at both sites, suppressed weeds and kept moisture in the ground even during the driest weeks of the summer.

Peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, green beans, squash, corn, and zucchini started out in greenhouses and then made the transition into the two test fields in July.

WVDA employees tended the gardens. The workers used lime, fertilizer, and urea nitrogen on the test acre near Riverside High School in Kanawha County. The Parkersburg plot relied on zero chemicals making it 100 percent organic

The biggest setback arrived in May. Weeks of rain kept the plots soggy into early-July, delaying planting. That also made it difficult to weed the gardens. The heat and sun finally dried things up just in time for picking season starting in August

Piles of peppers, scads of squash, and tubs of tomatoes came out of the ground. Workers collected, counted, and then delivered the produce to several charities.

Manna Meal in Charleston, one of those groups, used the fresh veggies from the garden to feed hundreds of hungry in the Capitol city. People also took the leftover veggies home for future meals. In Wood County, part of the produce went to the First Lutheran Church in Parkersburg. The organization set up a produce stand next to their community garden. Those in need bagged up what they could use to take home.

"These test gardens were a win/win for everyone involved," said Commissioner Helmick. "Not only is the WVDA learning facts and figures to help urban farmers, the needy received nutritious meals."

The gardens started yielding fresh produce in August and it just kept coming for months on end. Workers picked the final peppers in late October. The totals by season's end -- impressive.

The investment in the Riverside garden totaled \$2,301. That included \$754 for the cost of water to irrigate the site, \$546 for the plants and labor, and other miscellaneous items such as tomato stakes, fertilizer, and diesel fuel for the tractor. The potential revenue, using prices obtained from current USDA retail values, totaled \$16,842.75. If you subtract the investment cost, that comes out to a net gain of \$14,541.52.

Over at the Parkersburg plot, the investment totaled \$3,377. Tomato stakes ate up the largest part of the budget at \$1,500. Workers planted more tomatoes in Parkersburg than the Riverside site. The potential revenue for the Parkersburg plot came out to \$18,388.24. Take away the investment cost for a net total of \$15,010.82.

In order to make a garden profitable, the grower must find a way to turn their crop into cash. It could come from farmers markets, selling to local schools, or even a roadside stand. The source needs to be reliable.

"Those net totals for one acre can't support a family of four for a year. However, it can make a nice addition to your established income," said Helmick. "Take a look at the potential profits if you were to expand to four or five acres. It's amazing what the earth gives back."

Helmick stressed the profits aren't a guarantee. A year with too much rain or blight might lead to serious cuts in the profit margin. However, since the crops were diversified, the chance of an entire garden failing to produce is less likely.

The takeaway from the garden demonstration shows with some hard work, favorable weather, and a little good luck, a garden can grow your income.

